

VZCZCXYZ0013
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDM #6579/01 3531517
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 191517Z DEC 05
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6245
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0555
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 006579

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR ZEYA; LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: THE KILLING OF GEBRAN TUENI: WHAT WAS THE SARG
THINKING?

REF: DAMASCUS 6444

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Kathy Johnson-Casares, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: A minority view in Syria of the December 12 assassination of an-Nahar publisher Gebran Tueni argues that careful scrutiny of events in Syria leading up to the assassination, and close examination of the messages that the killing sends, and of the costs and benefits accruing after the killing, point to SARG involvement. These elements paint a compelling picture of the powerful motivations and apparent benefits that accrued to the SARG. It is therefore reasonable to examine the reasons that might have propelled the Syrian regime to order the killing of Tueni.

¶2. (C) Summary continued: The point in the assessment provided below is to see what that working assumption can tell us about the Syrian regime and its perceptions about the current crisis. A SARG decision to kill Tueni paints this regime as ruthless, calculating, and relatively unified or at least still capable of decisive, pre-emptive action. It would also indicate that President Bashar al-Asad is either in charge or helplessly implicated and dragged along by a thuggish regime that he cannot control. If Syria was behind the assassination, it would mean that the SARG is prepared to play very dirty to retain its hold over Lebanon and that it is determined to wait out the Bush Administration, in the conviction that the pressure will abate in the next 18 months. End Summary.

¶3. (C) With the investigation into the December 12 killing of An-Nahar publisher and Lebanese opposition figure Gebran Tueni still in its initial phase, there is likely to be no definitive word on his killers for months, if ever. The Syrian regime is suspected of ordering the hit on Tueni, to silence his biting criticisms, to send a threatening warning to the Lebanese opposition that no one can protect them, to deal a body blow to the intellectual leadership of that opposition, and possibly to delay the return to Lebanon of Sa'ad Hariri. The point in the assessment provided below is not to prove that the SARG killed Tueni, but to see what that working assumption tells us about the Syrian regime and its current situation.

¶4. (C) WHY NOW? In the two-three weeks before the assassination of Tueni, the Syrian regime seemed to sense that pressure against it had eased and that the crisis, at least for the moment, had passed. The arrival in mid-November of Saudi Prince Bandar for a series of visits to consult with President Bashar al-Asad was a critical sign to the Syrians of this change in the international environment. According to foreign relations expert Marwan Kabalan, it was

assumed that Bandar, who is seen as very close to the American administration, would not have come to Damascus without a green light from the U.S. The absence of critical USG statements during this period, except for statements on Kamal Labwani and Syria's human rights situation, apparently reinforced the widely-shared perception that the pressure on the regime had eased (even if prospects for a deal on Iraq and other issues remained remote.) Bandar's visits also communicated to the regime that the Saudis had finally gotten over their intense anger about the Hariri assassination and were willing to re-engage on the basis of a cold calculation of their interests. Finally, there was a sense here that the USG was preoccupied with the upcoming elections in Iraq.

15. (C) MEHLIS TIMING, OTHER FACTORS PROVIDE DENIABILITY FOR SARG: At the same time, the regime assessed that it had fought UNIIIC head Detlev Mehlis to a draw of sorts, had delivered the suspects for questioning in Vienna, and felt confident that it had avoided a finding of non-cooperation, avoided for the time being any arrests of the returned suspects, and succeeded in gaining more time, as it assumed the inquiry would be extended for six months. More importantly, the regime felt that the immediate threat of sanctions had eased. Those realities underpinned the regime's perfect excuse to deny involvement in a controversial assassination like Tueni's: with the scheduled release of the second Mehlis report imminent, the regime could not possibly have been so stupid as to mount such an operation. But, according to observers like Kabalan, the regime had already "digested" the anticipated hit from the second Mehlis report, and felt relieved, even euphoric in some quarters, that it had dodged a bullet. Kabalan speculated that the failed assassination attempt on the Hizballah official in Ba'albaak, Lebanon a few days before the killing of Tueni was a feint, meant to create more

deniability for the Syrian regime by showing that "pro-Syrian" targets were also being hit by "these mysterious killers."

16. (C) WHY?: Some Syrian contacts, while reluctant to accuse the SARG -- or in some cases, Bashar -- of killing Tueni, were less reserved about pointing out the benefits that accrued to the SARG. They were relatively open in saying that in strategic terms, this killing, unlike the killing of Hariri (or the extension of Lahoud), "was not a mistake." According to attorney Salahideen al-Khateeb, Syria will "pay for forty days" for the killing of Tueni, but in the longer-term, the absence of Tueni would devastate the Lebanese opposition since "he was the intellectual force" behind it. The regional impact of the killing of Tueni is also likely to be much more short-lived than that of former PM Hariri because, for the Saudis and others, Tueni is not a powerful Sunni political figure and ally.

17. (C) THE PERFECT THREAT TO THE LEBANESE OPPOSITION: Kabalan noted that the killing of Tueni allowed the SARG to communicate to all the Lebanese opposition that "we are still here, despite all the pressure, and can reach you; your new friends cannot protect you." If Tueni's killing was not a sufficiently powerful message, even more threatening messages are likely, added Kabalan, indicating that Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, or Marwan Hamade (with a second attempt on his life) could be next. Al-Khateeb went even further, describing Jumblatt's days as numbered, especially after the harsh remarks he had directed at Asad after the killing of Tueni.

18. (C) LAYING DOWN MARKERS ON HARIRI, HIZBALLAH? Tueni's killing made clear that it is very dangerous for Sa'ad Hariri to return to Lebanon and attempt to increase his political influence. It also effectively laid down a marker that any further cornering of Hizballah on the disarmament issue should be put off, according to Kabalan. Inside Syria, the killing sent fear and trembling through the opposition, many of whom believe the Tueni killing is a harbinger of widespread arrests and a further crackdown.

¶9. (C) WHAT IT MEANS: The killing of Tueni also seems to send a message over the heads of the Lebanese, to the U.S. and the French, communicating that the SARG regime considers Lebanon a critical strategic interest and that it is willing to take huge risks and to "play very dirty" to protect that interest. The killing of Tueni, according to Kabalan, indicates that Syria is "insisting that 'our interests there will not be ignored.'" With Iraq closed off by the American military presence, and the peace process in a deep freeze, Lebanon is Syria's only remaining venue for exercising its regional influence. The regime also seems to be communicating, if it is responsible for Tueni's death, that "we can get away with it." Finally, the killing indicates that there are murderous, highly competent actors in Lebanon that the SARG regime can call upon, capable of hitting hard-to-reach targets, without leaving much evidence behind.

¶10. (C) WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT THE SYRIAN REGIME? A SARG decision to kill Tueni at such a sensitive moment would paint this regime as ruthless, capable of decisive, pre-emptive action (regardless in internal divisions), tough and brazenly calculating. Many long-term observers of the regime, like Michel Kilo and Riyad Turk, have long argued that the regime has used criminal violence and political assassination for decades, both internally and abroad, to maintain its power and regional influence, and that it is incapable of changing or of engaging in meaningful political reform. According to Kabalan, the killing of Tueni reinforces that assessment, shows that the regime is more or less united -- including Asad at the top -- and is "addicted" to violence. It also shows how dangerous it is to corner such a regime and then allow the pressure to ease, even if temporarily. In Kabalan's view, if the regime gets away with the Tueni killing, more violence in Lebanon will follow.

¶11. (C) WHO IS LEADING THE POLICY? Some contacts are less convinced than Kabalan that Asad could be in charge of such a ruthless regime. They allow that elements inside the regime, centered in the security services, are probably involved in the killing of Tueni, but insist that Asad was not the decision-maker. They use the killing to argue that Asad is not in complete control of the regime. However, for civil society activist Amr al-Azm, that may be a distinction without a difference. In his view, the regime is "a runaway train," and Asad is trapped as engineer, more fearful of

jumping off than of maintaining nominal control. For al-Azm, "the oligarchy running things has made sure Asad's hands are dirty," making him further hesitate about jumping ship.

¶12. (C) For others, the killing of Tueni provokes contradictory responses, often woven into -- according to al-Amr -- a tissue of fear, denial, and shame that such a regime could be running their country. The contradictory response usually emerges in these contacts' attitudes about Asad. They will assert in general terms that Asad is a stronger leader and more in control than many assume, but then deny, usually on the basis of his personal characteristics, that he could be involved in ordering or countenancing such violence. According to al-Khateeb, for example, the President is not in control of the country to the extent of ordering the killing of Tueni. Khateeb and others who know him well insist that Asad does not have the personal decisiveness, ruthlessness, and combative personality to have ordered such action. Khateeb argues that the intense struggles going on in the inner circles of power, about how to respond to the crisis provoked by Mehlis, clearly indicate that the President is struggling -- and sometimes failing -- to control SMI chief Asif Shawkat and his allies in the regime. Nonetheless, Khateeb argues, without any discomfort over the apparent contradiction, that Asad is strong enough to order Shawkat to Vienna or elsewhere for questioning.

¶13. (C) HAMLET WITH A MEAN STREAK: Dr. Samir al-Taki issued a similarly hedged assessment to defend Asad, saying that the SARG as a government had not killed Tueni, but that elements within the SARG may have been involved. He mentioned SMI

chief Asif Shawkat and Ba'ath Party Regional Command Security Office chief Hisham Ikhtiyar as two who represented a camp inside the regime that wanted to destabilize Lebanon and likely supported a program of assassination there, using proxies in Lebanon. He added that they would be careful not to leave any evidence about their involvement in the assassinations "lying around," but that it was implicit in aggressive policy recommendations on Lebanon which they supported in inner regime circles. Al-Taki pointed to them as opponents of Asad's efforts to cooperate on Mehliis who were attempting to use whatever was available, including instability in Lebanon, to sabotage the President's efforts. Nonetheless, it is clear that Asad has surrounded himself with -- and is heavily influenced by -- these hard-liners, and family members like sister Bushra and brother Maher who support them. It should also be noted that there is a powerful perception among some regime observers that Asad may be indecisive in many respects, but on Lebanon, he seems to have very strong views and has shown himself willing to impose them.

¶14. (C) As reported reftel, many of our other contacts believe, or say they believe, that the SARG was not involved in killing Tuani because Syria is the party most damaged by assassination. Repeating arguments made after the killing of Hariri, they insist -- without providing enough evidence so that their scenarios collapse into implausibility -- that some undetermined party such as Israel or the U.S. itself is engaged in massive conspiracy to harm Syria's interests and internationalize the issues in Lebanon. The problem with the argument this time, in addition to its implausibility, is that Syria's interests thus far have not sustained much tangible damage from the Tuani killing. As if to illustrate the point, cries by SARG officials about the damage caused by the Tuani assassination subsided just a day or so after the killing.

¶15. (C) CONCLUSION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR US?: If Syria was behind the Tuani assassination, it would mean that the SARG is prepared to play very dirty to retain its Lebanon card and prevent Lebanon from falling into a pro-Western orbit. A decision to kill Tuani points toward regime calculations that U.S. pressure on Syria will abate in the next year or so and that the SARG has determined that it can -- or must try to -- wait out the Bush Administration, believing that it has allies capable of defending it against UN sanctions and fearful of instability here if the regime were to collapse. In the meantime, the regime will test the outer limits of that pressure (while keeping Lebanon in line) but continue to send out feelers indicating that it "desperately" wants a deal with the U.S. Tuani's demise seems to indicate that any Syrian offer of a deal will be limited to Iraq issues and not include Lebanon. Such private signals from the SARG are likely to be mixed with public shows of defiance and threats (coupled with demonstrations on the ground) regarding instability in Lebanon (and elsewhere). If the SARG killed Tuani, that signals a near-reckless brazenness and seems to promise, in the absence of changes or deterrent reaction, that more killings in Lebanon are likely to occur. It also would indicate that the SARG believes the international will is sufficiently fractured so as to allow it to carry on with a ruthless campaign to maintain its dominating influence in Lebanon without suffering any consequences or real retribution.

JOHNSON-CASARES